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MAY FLOWERS

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BY LOUISA M. ALCOTT

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"The best of all were the cosey talks we had in the twilight."
Frontispiece.

MAY FLOWERS

BY

LOUISA M. ALCOTT

AUTHOR OF "LITTLE WOMEN," "LITTLE MEN,"
"AN OLD-FASHIONED GIRL," ETC.

Illustrated

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MAY FLOWERS

BEING Boston girls, of course they got up a club for mental improvement, and, as they were all descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers, they called it the May Flower Club. A very good name, and the six young girls who were members of it made a very pretty posy when they met together, once a week, to sew, and read well-chosen books. At the first meeting of the season, after being separated all summer, there was a good deal of gossip to be attended to before the question, "What shall we read?" came up for serious discussion.

Anna Winslow, as president, began by proposing "Happy Dodd;" but a chorus of "I 've read it!" made her turn to her list for another title.

"'Prisoners of Poverty' is all about working-women, very true and very sad; but Mamma said it might do us good to know something of the hard times other girls have," said Anna, soberly; for she was a thoughtful creature, very anxious to do her duty in all ways.

"I 'd rather not know about sad things, since I can't help to make them any better," answered Ella Carver, softly patting the apple blossoms she was embroidering on a bit of blue satin.

"But we might help if we really tried, I suppose; you know how much Happy Dodd did when she once began, and she was only a poor little girl without half the means of doing good which we have," said Anna, glad to discuss the matter, for she had a little plan in her head and wanted to prepare a way for proposing it.

"Yes, I 'm always saying that I have more than my share of fun and comfort and pretty things, and that I ought and will share them with some one. But I don't do it; and now and then, when I hear about real poverty, or dreadful sickness, I feel *so* wicked it quite upsets me. If I knew *how* to begin, I really would. But dirty little children don't come in my way, nor tipsy women to be reformed, nor nice lame girls to sing and pray with, as it all happens in books," cried Marion Warren, with such a remorseful expression on her merry round face that her mates laughed with one accord.

"I know something that I *could* do if I only had the courage to begin it. But Papa would

shake his head unbelievingly, and Mamma worry about its being proper, and it would interfere with my music, and everything nice that I especially wanted to go to would be sure to come on whatever day I set for my good work, and I should get discouraged or ashamed, and not half do it, so I don't begin, but I know I ought." And Elizabeth Alden rolled her large eyes from one friend to another, as if appealing to them to goad her to this duty by counsel and encouragement of some sort.

"Well, I suppose it 's right, but I do perfectly hate to go poking round among poor folks, smelling bad smells, seeing dreadful sights, hearing woful tales, and running the risk of catching fever, and diphtheria, and horrid things. I don't pretend to like charity, but say right out I 'm a silly, selfish wretch, and want to enjoy every minute, and not worry about other people. Is n't it shameful?"

Maggie Bradford looked such a sweet little sinner as she boldly made this sad confession, that no one could scold her, though Ida Standish, her bosom friend, shook her head, and Anna said, with a sigh: "I 'm afraid we all feel very much as Maggie does, though we don't own it so honestly. Last spring, when

I was ill and thought I might die, I was so ashamed of my idle, frivolous winter, that I felt as if I 'd give all I had to be able to live it over and do better. Much is not expected of a girl of eighteen, I know; but oh! there were heaps of kind little things I *might* have done if I had n't thought only of myself. I resolved if I lived I 'd try at least to be less selfish, and make some one happier for my being in the world. I tell you, girls, it 's rather solemn when you lie expecting to die, and your sins come up before you, even though they are very small ones. I never shall forget it, and after my lovely summer I mean to be a better girl, and lead a better life if I can."

Anna was so much in earnest that her words, straight out of a very innocent and contrite heart, touched her hearers deeply, and put them into the right mood to embrace her proposition. No one spoke for a moment, then Maggie said quietly, —

"I know what it is. I felt very much so when the horses ran away, and for fifteen minutes I sat clinging to Mamma, expecting to be killed. Every unkind, undutiful word I 'd ever said to her came back to me, and was worse to bear than the fear of sudden death. It scared a

great deal of naughtiness out of me, and dear Mamma and I have been more to each other ever since."

"Let us begin with 'The Prisoners of Poverty,' and perhaps it will show us something to do," said Lizzie. "But I must say I never felt as if shop-girls needed much help; they generally seem so contented with themselves, and so pert or patronizing to us, that I don't pity them a bit, though it must be a hard life."

"I think we can't do *much* in that direction, except set an example of good manners when we go shopping. I wanted to propose that we each choose some small charity for this winter, and do it faithfully. That will teach us how to do more by and by, and we can help one another with our experiences, perhaps, or amuse with our failures. What do you say?" asked Anna, surveying her five friends with a persuasive smile.

"What *could* we do?"

"People will call us goody-goody."

"I haven't the least idea how to go to work."

"Don't believe Mamma will let me."

"We 'd better change our names from May Flowers to sisters of charity, and wear meek black bonnets and flapping cloaks."

Anna received these replies with great composure, and waited for the meeting to come to order, well knowing that the girls would have their fun and outcry first, and then set to work in good earnest.

"I think it 's a lovely idea, and I 'll carry out my plan. But I won't tell what it is yet; you 'd all shout, and say I could n't do it, but if you were trying also, that would keep me up to the mark," said Lizzie, with a decided snap of her scissors, as she trimmed the edges of a plush case for her beloved music.

"Suppose we all keep our attempts secret, and not let our right hand know what the left hand does? It 's such fun to mystify people, and then no one *can* laugh at us. If we fail, we can say nothing; if we succeed, we can tell of it and get our reward. I 'd like that way, and will look round at once for some especially horrid boot-black, ungrateful old woman, or ugly child, and devote myself to him, her, or it with the patience of a saint," cried Maggie, caught by the idea of doing good in secret and being found out by accident.

The other girls agreed, after some discussion, and then Anna took the floor again.

"I propose that we each work in our own

way till next May, then, at our last meeting, report what we have done, truly and honestly, and plan something better for next year. Is it a vote?"

It evidently was a unanimous vote, for five gold thimbles went up, and five blooming faces smiled as the five girlish voices cried, "Aye!"

"Very well, now let us decide what to read, and begin at once. I think the 'Prisoners' a good book, and we shall doubtless get some hints from it."

So they began, and for an hour one pleasant voice after the other read aloud those sad, true stories of workingwomen and their hard lives, showing these gay young creatures what their pretty clothes cost the real makers of them, and how much injustice, suffering, and wasted strength went into them. It was very sober reading, but most absorbing; for the crochet needles went slower and slower, the lace-work lay idle, and a great tear shone like a drop of dew on the apple blossoms as Ella listened to "Rose's Story." They skipped the statistics, and dipped here and there as each took her turn; but when the two hours were over, and it was time for the club to adjourn, all the members were deeply interested in that pathetic

book, and more in earnest than before; for this glimpse into other lives showed them how much help was needed, and made them anxious to lend a hand.

"We can't do much, being 'only girls,'" said Anna; "but if each does one small chore somewhere it will pave the way for better work; so we will all try, at least, though it seems like so many ants trying to move a mountain."

"Well, ants build nests higher than a man's head in Africa; you remember the picture of them in our old geographies? And we can do as much, I 'm sure, if each tugs her pebble or straw faithfully. I shall shoulder mine to-morrow if Mamma is willing," answered Lizzie, shutting up her work-bag as if she had her resolution inside and was afraid it might evaporate before she got home.

"I shall stand on the Common, and proclaim aloud, 'Here 's a nice young missionary, in want of a job! Charity for sale cheap! Who 'll buy? who 'll buy?'" said Maggie, with a resigned expression, and a sanctimonious twang to her voice.

"I shall wait and see what comes to me, since I don't know what I 'm fit for;" and Marion gazed out of the window as if expecting to

see some interesting pauper waiting for her to appear.

"I shall ask Miss Bliss for advice; she knows all about the poor, and will give me a good start," added prudent Ida, who resolved to do nothing rashly lest she should fail.

"I shall probably have a class of dirty little girls, and teach them how to sew, as I can't do anything else. They won't learn much, but steal, and break, and mess, and be a dreadful trial, and I shall get laughed at and wish I had n't done it. Still I shall try it, and sacrifice my fancy-work to the cause of virtue," said Ella, carefully putting away her satin glove-case with a fond glance at the delicate flowers she so loved to embroider.

"I have no plans, but want to do so much I shall have to wait till I discover what is best. After to-day we won't speak of our work, or it won't be a secret any longer. In May we will report. Good luck to all, and good-by till next Saturday."

With these farewell words from their president the girls departed, with great plans and new ideas simmering in their young heads and hearts.

It seemed a vast undertaking; but where

there is a will there is always a way, and soon it was evident that each had found "a little chore" to do for sweet charity's sake. Not a word was said at the weekly meetings, but the artless faces betrayed all shades of hope, discouragement, pride, and doubt, as their various attempts seemed likely to succeed or fail. Much curiosity was felt, and a few accidental words, hints, or meetings in queer places, were very exciting, though nothing was discovered.

Marion was often seen in a North End car, and Lizzie in a South End car, with a bag of books and papers. Ella haunted a certain shop where fancy articles were sold, and Ida always brought plain sewing to the club. Maggie seemed very busy at home, and Anna was found writing industriously several times when one of her friends called. All seemed very happy, and rather important when outsiders questioned them about their affairs. But they had their pleasures as usual, and seemed to enjoy them with an added relish, as if they realized as never before how many blessings they possessed, and were grateful for them.

So the winter passed, and slowly something new and pleasant seemed to come into the lives of these young girls. The listless, discontented

look some of them used to wear passed away; a sweet earnestness and a cheerful activity made them charming, though they did not know it, and wondered when people said, "That set of girls are growing up beautifully; they will make fine women by and by." The mayflowers were budding under the snow, and as spring came on the fresh perfume began to steal out, the rosy faces to brighten, and the last year's dead leaves to fall away, leaving the young plants green and strong.

On the 15th of May the club met for the last time that year, as some left town early, and all were full of spring work and summer plans. Every member was in her place at an unusually early hour that day, and each wore an air of mingled anxiety, expectation, and satisfaction, pleasant to behold. Anna called them to order with three raps of her thimble and a beaming smile.

"We need not choose a book for our reading to-day, as each of us is to contribute an original history of her winter's work. I know it will be very interesting, and I hope more instructive, than some of the novels we have read. Who shall begin?"

"You! you!" was the unanimous answer;

for all loved and respected her very much, and felt that their presiding officer should open the ball.

Anna colored modestly, but surprised her friends by the composure with which she related her little story, quite as if used to public speaking.

"You know I told you last November that I should have to look about for something that I *could* do. I did look a long time, and was rather in despair, when my task came to me in the most unexpected way. Our winter work was being done, so I had a good deal of shopping on my hands, and found it less a bore than usual, because I liked to watch the shop girls, and wish I dared ask some of them if I could help them. I went often to get trimmings and buttons at Cotton's, and had a good deal to do with the two girls at that counter. They were very obliging and patient about matching some jet ornaments for Mamma, and I found out that their names were Mary and Maria Porter. I liked them, for they were very neat and plain in their dress, — not like some, who seem to think that if their waists are small, and their hair dressed in the fashion, it is no matter how soiled their collars are, nor how untidy their

nails. Well, one day when I went for certain kinds of buttons which were to be made for us, Maria, the younger one, who took the order, was not there. I asked for her, and Mary said she was at home with a lame knee. I was so sorry, and ventured to put a few questions in a friendly way. Mary seemed glad to tell her troubles, and I found that 'Ria,' as she called her sister, had been suffering for a long time, but did not complain for fear of losing her place. No stools are allowed at Cotton's, so the poor girls stand nearly all day, or rest a minute now and then on a half-opened drawer. I 'd seen Maria doing it, and wondered why some one did not make a stir about seats in this place, as they have in other stores and got stools for the shop women. I did n't dare to speak to the gentlemen, but I gave Mary the Jack roses I wore in my breast, and asked if I might take some books or flowers to poor Maria. It was lovely to see her sad face light up and hear her thank me when I went to see her, for she was very lonely without her sister, and discouraged about her place. She did not lose it entirely, but had to work at home, for her lame knee will be a long time in getting well. I begged Mamma and Mrs. Allingham to speak

to Mr. Cotton for her; so she got the mending of the jet and bead work to do, and buttons to cover, and things of that sort. Mary takes them to and fro, and Maria feels so happy not to be idle. We also got stools for all the other girls in that shop. Mrs. Allingham is so rich and kind she can do anything, and now it 's such a comfort to see those tired things resting when off duty that I often go in and enjoy the sight."

Anna paused as cries of "Good! good!" interrupted her tale; but she did not add the prettiest part of it, and tell how the faces of the young women behind the counters brightened when she came in, nor how gladly all served the young lady who showed them what a true gentlewoman was.

"I hope that is n't all?" said Maggie, eagerly.

"Only a little more. I know you will laugh when I tell you that I 've been reading papers to a class of shop girls at the Union once a week all winter."

A murmur of awe and admiration greeted this deeply interesting statement; for, true to the traditions of the modern Athens in which they lived, the girls all felt the highest respect for "papers" on any subject, it being the fashion

for ladies, old and young, to read and discuss every subject, from pottery to Pantheism, at the various clubs all over the city.

"It came about very naturally," continued Anna, as if anxious to explain her seeming audacity. "I used to go to see Molly and Ria, and heard all about their life and its few pleasures, and learned to like them more and more. They had only each other in the world, lived in two rooms, worked all day, and in the way of amusement or instruction had only what they found at the Union in the evening. I went with them a few times, and saw how useful and pleasant it was, and wanted to help, as other kind girls only a little older than I did. Eva Randal read a letter from a friend in Russia one time, and the girls enjoyed it very much. That reminded me of my brother George's lively journals, written when he was abroad. You remember how we used to laugh over them when he sent them home? Well, when I was begged to give them an evening, I resolved to try one of those amusing journal-letters, and chose the best, — all about how George and a friend went to the different places Dickens describes in some of his funny books. I wish you could have seen how those dear girls en-

joyed it, and laughed till they cried over the dismay of the boys, when they knocked at a door in Kingsgate Street, and asked if Mrs. Gamp lived there. It was actually a barber's shop, and a little man, very like Poll Sweedlepipes, told them 'Mrs. Britton was the nuss as lived there now.' It upset those rascals to come so near the truth, and they ran away because they could n't keep sober."

The members of the club indulged in a general smile as they recalled the immortal Sairey with "the bottle on the mankle-shelf," the "cowcumber," and the wooden pippins. Then Anna continued, with an air of calm satisfaction, quite sure now of her audience and herself, —

"It was a great success. So I went on, and when the journals were done, I used to read other things, and picked up books for their library, and helped in any way I could, while learning to know them better and give them confidence in me. They are proud and shy, just as we should be, but if you *really* want to be friends and don't mind rebuffs now and then, they come to trust and like you, and there is so much to do for them one never need sit idle any more. I won't give names, as they don't like

it, nor tell how I tried to serve them, but it is very sweet and good for me to have found this work, and to know that each year I can do it better and better. So I feel encouraged and am very glad I began, as I hope you all are. Now, who comes next?"

As Anna ended, the needles dropped and ten soft hands gave her a hearty round of applause; for all felt that she had done well, and chosen a task especially fitted to her powers, as she had money, time, tact, and the winning manners that make friends everywhere.

Beaming with pleasure at their approval, but feeling that they made too much of her small success, Anna called the club to order by saying, "Ella looks as if she were anxious to tell her experiences, so perhaps we had better ask her to hold forth next."

"Hear! hear!" cried the girls; and, nothing loath, Ella promptly began, with twinkling eyes and a demure smile, for *her* story ended romantically.

"If you are interested in shop girls, Miss President and ladies, you will like to know that *I* am one, at least a silent partner and co-worker in a small fancy store at the West End."

"No!" exclaimed the amazed club with one voice; and, satisfied with this sensational beginning, Ella went on.

"I really am, and you have bought some of my fancy-work. Isn't that a good joke? You needn't stare so, for I actually made that needle-book, Anna, and my partner knit Lizzie's new cloud. This is the way it all happened. I didn't wish to waste any time, but one can't rush into the street and collar shabby little girls, and say, 'Come along and learn to sew,' without a struggle, so I thought I'd go and ask Mrs. Brown how to begin. Her branch of the Associated Charities is in Laurel Street, not far from our house, you know; and the very day after our last meeting I posted off to get my 'chore.' I expected to have to fit work for poor needlewomen, or go to see some dreadful sick creature, or wash dirty little Pats, and was bracing up my mind for whatever might come, as I toiled up the hill in a gale of wind. Suddenly my hat flew off and went gayly skipping away, to the great delight of some black imps, who only grinned and cheered me on as I trotted after it with wild grabs and wrathful dodges. I got it at last out of a puddle, and there I was in a nice mess. The elastic was broken, feather

wet, and the poor thing all mud and dirt. I did n't care much, as it was my old one, — dressed for my work, you see. But I could n't go home bareheaded, and I did n't know a soul in that neighborhood. I turned to step into a grocery store at the corner, to borrow a brush, or buy a sheet of paper to wear, for I looked like a lunatic with my battered hat and my hair in a perfect mop. Luckily I spied a woman's fancy shop on the other corner, and rushed in there to hide myself, for the brats hooted and people stared. It was a very small shop, and behind the counter sat a tall, thin, washed-out-looking woman, making a baby's hood. She looked poor and blue and rather sour, but took pity on me; and while she sewed the cord, dried the feather, and brushed off the dirt, I warmed myself and looked about to see what I could buy in return for her trouble.

"A few children's aprons hung in the little window, with some knit lace, balls, and old-fashioned garters, two or three dolls, and a very poor display of small wares. In a show-case, however, on the table that was the counter, I found some really pretty things, made of plush, silk, and ribbon, with a good deal of taste. So I said I 'd buy a needle-book, and a gay ball,

and a pair of distracting baby's shoes, made to look like little open-work socks with pink ankle-ties, so cunning and dainty, I was glad to get them for Cousin Clara's baby. The woman seemed pleased, though she had a grim way of talking, and never smiled once. I observed that she handled my hat as if used to such work, and evidently liked to do it. I thanked her for repairing damages so quickly and well, and she said, with my hat on her hand, as if she hated to part with it, 'I 'm used to millinaryin' and never should have give it up, if I did n't have my folks to see to. I took this shop, hopin' to make things go, as such a place was needed round here, but mother broke down, and is a sight of care; so I could n't leave her, and doctors is expensive, and times hard, and I had to drop my trade, and fall back on pins and needles, and so on.' "

Ella was a capital mimic, and imitated the nasal tones of the Vermont woman to the life, with a doleful pucker of her own blooming face, which gave such a truthful picture of poor Miss Almira Miller that those who had seen her recognized it at once, and laughed gayly.

"Just as I was murmuring a few words of regret at her bad luck," continued Ella, "a sharp voice called out from a back room, 'Almiry! Almiry! come here.' It sounded very like a cross parrot, but it was the old lady, and while I put on my hat I heard her asking who was in the shop, and what we were 'gabbin' about.' Her daughter told her, and the old soul demanded to 'see the gal;' so I went in, being ready for fun as usual. It was a little, dark, dismal place, but as neat as a pin, and in the bed sat a regular Grandma Smallweed smoking a pipe, with a big cap, a snuff-box, and a red cotton handkerchief. She was a tiny, dried-up thing, brown as a berry, with eyes like black beads, a nose and chin that nearly met, and hands like birds' claws. But such a fierce, lively, curious, blunt old lady you never saw, and I did n't know what would be the end of me when she began to question, then to scold, and finally to demand that 'folks should come and trade to Almiry's shop after promisin' they would, and she havin' took a lease of the place on account of them lies.' I wanted to laugh, but dared not do it, so just let her croak, for the daughter had to go to her customers. The old lady's tirade informed me that they came

from Vermont, had 'been wal on 't till father died and the farm was sold.' Then it seems the women came to Boston and got on pretty well till 'a stroke of numb-palsy,' whatever that is, made the mother helpless and kept Almiry at home to care for her. I can't tell you how funny and yet how sad it was to see the poor old soul, so full of energy and yet so helpless, and the daughter so discouraged with her pathetic little shop and no customers to speak of. I did not know what to say till 'Grammer Miller,' as the children call her, happened to say, when she took up her knitting after the lecture, 'If folks who go spendin' money reckless on redic'lous toys for Christmas only knew what nice things, useful and fancy, me and Almiry could make ef we had the goods, they 'd jest come round this corner and buy 'em, and keep me out of a Old Woman's Home and that good, hard-workin' gal of mine out of a 'sylum; for go there she will ef she don't get a boost somehow, with rent and firin' and vittles all on her shoulders, and me only able to wag them knittin'-needles.'

"'I will buy things here and tell all my friends about it, and I have a drawer full of pretty bits of silk and velvet and plush, that I

will give Miss Miller for her work, if she will let me.' I added that, for I saw that Almiry was rather proud, and hid her troubles under a grim look.

"That pleased the old lady, and, lowering her voice, she said, with a motherly sort of look in her beady eyes: 'Seein' as you are so friendly, I'll tell you what frets me most, a layin' here, a burden to my darter. She kep' company with Nathan Baxter, a master carpenter up to Westminster where we lived, and ef father had n't a died suddin' they 'd a ben married. They waited a number o' years, workin' to their trades, and we was hopin' all would turn out wal, when troubles come, and here we be. Nathan 's got his own folks to see to, and Almiry won't add to *his* load with hern, nor leave me; so she give him back his ring, and jest buckled to all alone. She don't say a word, but it 's wearin' her to a shadder, and I can't do a thing to help, but make a few pin-balls, knit garters, and kiver holders. Ef she got a start in business it would cheer her up a sight, and give her a kind of a hopeful prospeck, for old folks can't live forever, and Nathan is a waitin', faithful and true.'

"That just finished me, for I am romantic,

and do enjoy love stories with all my heart, even if the lovers are only a skinny spinster and a master carpenter. So I just resolved to see what I could do for poor Almiry and the peppery old lady. I did n't promise anything but my bits, and, taking the things I bought, went home to talk it over with Mamma. I found she had often got pins and tape, and such small wares, at the little shop, and found it very convenient, though she knew nothing about the Millers. She was willing I should help if I could, but advised going slowly, and seeing what they could do first. We did not dare to treat them like beggars, and send them money and clothes, and tea and sugar, as we do the Irish, for they were evidently respectable people, and proud as poor. So I took my bundle of odds and ends, and Mamma added some nice large pieces of dresses we had done with, and gave a fine order for aprons and holders and balls for our church fair.

"It would have done your hearts good, girls, to see those poor old faces light up as I showed my scraps, and asked if the work would be ready by Christmas. Grammer fairly swam in the gay colors I strewed over her bed, and enjoyed them like a child, while Almiry tried to be

grim, but had to give it up, as she began at once to cut aprons, and dropped tears all over the muslin when her back was turned to me. I did n't know a washed-out old maid *could* be so pathetic."

Ella stopped to give a regretful sigh over her past blindness, while her hearers made a sympathetic murmur; for young hearts are very tender, and take an innocent interest in lovers' sorrows, no matter how humble.

"Well, that was the beginning of it. I got so absorbed in *making* things go well that I did n't look any further, but just 'buckled to' with Miss Miller and helped run that little shop. No one knew me in that street, so I slipped in and out, and did what I liked. The old lady and I got to be great friends; though she often pecked and croaked like a cross raven, and was very wearing. I kept her busy with her 'pin-balls and knittin'-work,' and supplied Almiry with pretty materials for the various things I found she could make. You would n't believe what dainty bows those long fingers could tie, what ravishing doll's hats she would make out of a scrap of silk and lace, or the ingenious things she concocted with cones and shells and fans and baskets. I love such work,

and used to go and help her often, for I wanted her window and shop to be full for Christmas, and lure in plenty of customers. Our new toys, and the little cases of sewing silk sold well, and people began to come more, after I lent Almiry some money to lay in a stock of better goods. Papa enjoyed my business venture immensely, and was never tired of joking about it. He actually went and bought balls for four small black boys who were gluing their noses to the window one day, spellbound by the orange, red, and blue treasures displayed there. He liked my partner's looks, though he teased me by saying that we 'd better add lemonade to our stock as poor dear Almiry's acid face would make lemons unnecessary and sugar and water were cheap.

"Well, Christmas came, and we did a great business, for Mamma came and sent others, and our fancy things were as pretty and cheaper than those at the art stores, so they went well, and the Millers were cheered up, and I felt encouraged, and we took a fresh start after the holidays. One of my gifts at New Year was my own glove-case, — you remember the apple-blossom thing I began last autumn? I put it in our window to fill up, and Mamma bought it,

and gave it to me full of elegant gloves, with a sweet note, and Papa sent a check to 'Miller, Warren, & Co.' I was so pleased and proud I could hardly help telling you all. But the best joke was the day you girls came in and bought our goods, and I peeped at you through the crack of the door, being in the back room dying with laughter to see you look round, and praise our 'nice assortment of useful and pretty articles.' "

"That 's all very well, and we can bear to be laughed at if you succeeded, Miss. But I don't believe you did, for no Millers are there now. Have you taken a palatial store on Boylston Street for this year, intending to run it alone? We 'll all patronize it, and your name will look well on a sign," said Maggie, wondering what the end of Ella's experience had been.

"Ah! I still have the best of it, for my romance finished up delightfully, as you shall hear. We did well all winter, and no wonder. What was needed was a little 'boost' in the right direction, and I could give it; so my Millers were much comforted, and we were good friends. But in March Grammer died suddenly, and poor Almiry mourned as if she

had been the sweetest mother in the world. The old lady's last wishes were to be 'laid out harnsome in a cap with a pale blue satin ribbin, white was n't becomin', to hev at least three carriages to the funeral, and be sure a paper with her death in it was sent to N. Baxter, Westminster, Vermont.'

"I faithfully obeyed her commands, put on the ugly cap myself, gave a party of old ladies from the Home a drive in the hacks, and carefully directed a marked paper to Nathan, hoping that he *had* proved 'faithful and true.' I did n't expect he would, so was not surprised when no answer came. But I *was* rather amazed when Almiry told me she did n't care to keep on with the store now she was free. She wanted to visit her friends a spell this spring, and in the fall would go back to her trade in some milliner's store.

"I was sorry, for I really enjoyed my partnership. It seemed a little bit ungrateful after all my trouble in getting her customers, but I did n't say anything, and we sold out to the Widow Bates, who is a good soul with six children, and will profit by our efforts.

"Almiry bid me good-by with all the grim look gone out of her face, many thanks, and a

hearty promise to write soon. That was in April. A week ago I got a short letter saying, —

"'DEAR FRIEND, — You will be pleased to hear that I am married to Mr. Baxter, and shall remain here. He was away when the paper came with mother's death, but as soon as he got home he wrote. I could n't make up my mind till I got home and see him. Now it 's all right, and I am very happy. Many thanks for all you done for me and mother. I shall never forget it. My husband sends respects, and I remain

"'Yours gratefully,

"'ALMIRA M. BAXTER.'"

"That 's splendid! You did well, and next winter you can look up another sour spinster and cranky old lady and make them happy," said Anna, with the approving smile all loved to receive from her.

"My adventures are not a bit romantic, or even interesting, and yet I 've been as busy as a bee all winter, and enjoyed my work very much," began Elizabeth, as the President gave her a nod.

"The plan I had in mind was to go and carry books and papers to the people in hospitals, as one of Mamma's friends has done for years. I went once to the City Hospital with her, and it

was very interesting, but I did n't dare to go to the grown people all alone, so I went to the Children's Hospital, and soon loved to help amuse the poor little dears. I saved all the picture-books and papers I could find for them, dressed dolls, and mended toys, and got new ones, and made bibs and night-gowns, and felt like the mother of a large family.

"I had my pets, of course, and did my best for them, reading and singing and amusing them, for many suffered very much. One little girl was so dreadfully burned she could not use her hands, and would lie and look at a gay dolly tied to the bedpost by the hour together, and talk to it and love it, and died with it on her pillow when I 'sung lullaby' to her for the last time. I keep it among my treasures, for I learned a lesson in patience from little Norah that I never can forget.

"Then Jimmy Dolan with hip disease was a great delight to me, for he was as gay as a lark in spite of pain, and a real little hero in the way he bore the hard things that had to be done to him. He never can get well, and he is at home now; but I still see to him, and he is learning to make toy furniture very nicely, so that by and by, if he gets able to work at all, he may

"I had my pets of course, and did my best for them."
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be able to learn a cabinet-maker's trade, or some easy work.

"But my pet of pets was Johnny, the blind boy. His poor eyes had to be taken out, and there he was left so helpless and pathetic, all his life before him, and no one to help him, for his people were poor, and he had to go away from the hospital since he was incurable. He seemed almost given to me, for the first time I saw him I was singing to Jimmy, when the door opened and a small boy came fumbling in.

"'I hear a pretty voice, I want to find it,' he said, stopping as I stopped with both hands out as if begging for more.

"'Come on, Johnny, and the lady will sing to you like a bobolink,' called Jimmy, as proud as Barnum showing off Jumbo.

"The poor little thing came and stood at my knee, without stirring, while I sang all the nursery jingles I knew. Then he put such a thin little finger on my lips as if to feel where the music came from, and said, smiling all over his white face, 'More, please more, lots of 'em! I love it!'

"So I sang away till I was as hoarse as a crow, and Johnny drank it all in like water; kept time with his head, stamped when I gave

him 'Marching through Georgia,' and hurrahed feebly in the chorus of 'Red, White, and Blue.' It was lovely to see how he enjoyed it, and I was so glad I had a voice to comfort those poor babies with. He cried when I had to go, and so touched my heart that I asked all about him, and resolved to get him into the Blind School as the only place where he could be taught and made happy."

"I thought you were bound there the day I met you, Lizzie; but you looked as solemn as if all your friends had lost their sight," cried Marion.

"I did feel solemn, for if Johnny could not go there he would be badly off. Fortunately he was ten, and dear Mrs. Russell helped me, and those good people took him in though they were crowded. 'We cannot turn one away,' said kind Mr. Parpatharges.

"So there my boy is, as happy as a king with his little mates, learning all sorts of useful lessons and pretty plays. He models nicely in clay. Here is one of his little works. Could you do as well without eyes?" and Lizzie proudly produced a very one-sided pear with a long straw for a stem. "I don't expect he will ever be a sculptor, but I hope he will do some-

thing with music, he loves it so, and is already piping away on a fife very cleverly. Whatever his gift may prove, if he lives, he will be taught to be a useful, independent man, not a helpless burden, nor an unhappy creature sitting alone in the dark. I feel very happy about my lads, and am surprised to find how well I get on with them. I shall look up some more next year, for I really think I have quite a gift that way, though you would n't expect it, as I have no brothers, and always had a fancy boys were little imps."

The girls were much amused at Lizzie's discovery of her own powers, for she was a stately damsel, who never indulged in romps, but lived for her music. Now it was evident that she had found the key to unlock childish hearts, and was learning to use it, quite unconscious that the sweet voice she valued so highly was much improved by the tender tones singing lullabies gave it. The fat pear was passed round like refreshments, receiving much praise and no harsh criticism; and when it was safely returned to its proud possessor, Ida began her tale in a lively tone.

"I waited for *my* chore, and it came tumbling down our basement steps one rainy day in the

shape of a large dilapidated umbrella with a pair of small boots below it. A mild howl made me run to open the door, for I was at lunch in the dining-room, all alone, and rather blue because I could n't go over to see Ella. A very small girl lay with her head in a puddle at the foot of the steps, the boots waving in the air, and the umbrella brooding over her like a draggled green bird.

"'Are you hurt, child?' said I.

"'No, I thank you, ma'am,' said the mite quite calmly, as she sat up and settled a woman's shabby black hat on her head.

"'Did you come begging?' I asked.

"'No, ma'am, I came for some things Mrs. Grover's got for us. She told me to. I don't beg.' And up rose the sopping thing with great dignity.

"So I asked her to sit down, and ran up to call Mrs. Grover. She was busy with Grandpa just then, and when I went back to my lunch there sat my lady with her arms folded, water dripping out of the toes of her old boots as they hung down from the high chair, and the biggest blue eyes I ever saw fixed upon the cake and oranges on the table. I gave her a piece, and she sighed with rapture, but

"'Are you hurt, child?' said I."
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only picked at it till I asked if she did n't like it.

"'Oh yes, 'm, it 's elegant! Only I was wishin' I could take it to Caddy and Tot, if you did n't mind. They never had frostin' in all their lives, and I did once.'

"Of course I put up a little basket of cake and oranges and figs, and while Lotty feasted, we talked. I found that their mother washed dishes all day in a restaurant over by the Albany Station, leaving the three children alone in the room they have on Berry Street. Think of that poor thing going off before light these winter mornings to stand over horrid dishes all day long, and those three scraps of children alone till night! Sometimes they had a fire, and when they had n't they stayed in bed. Broken food and four dollars a week was all the woman got, and on that they tried to live. Good Mrs. Grover happened to be nursing a poor soul near Berry Street last summer, and used to see the three little things trailing round the streets with no one to look after them.

"Lotty is nine, though she looks about six, but is as old as most girls of fourteen, and takes good care of 'the babies,' as she calls the younger ones. Mrs. Grover went to see them,

and, though a hard-working creature, did all she could for them. This winter she has plenty of time to sew, for Grandpa needs little done for him except at night and morning, and that kind woman spent her own money, and got warm flannel and cotton and stuff, and made each child a good suit. Lotty had come for hers, and when the bundle was in her arms she hugged it close, and put up her little face to kiss Grover so prettily, I felt that I wanted to do something too. So I hunted up Min's old waterproof and rubbers, and a hood, and sent Lotty home as happy as a queen, promising to go and see her. I did go, and there was my work all ready for me. Oh, girls! such a bare, cold room, without a spark of fire, and no food but a pan of bits of pie and bread and meat, not fit for any one to eat, and in the bed, with an old carpet for cover, lay the three children. Tot and Caddy cuddled in the warmest place, while Lotty, with her little blue hands, was trying to patch up some old stockings with bits of cotton. I didn't know *how* to begin, but Lotty did, and I just took her orders; for that wise little woman told me where to buy a bushel of coal and some kindlings, and milk and meal, and all I wanted. I worked like a beaver for

an hour or two, and was so glad I 'd been to a cooking-class, for I could make a fire, with Lotty to do the grubby part, and start a nice soup with the cold meat and potatoes, and an onion or so. Soon the room was warm, and full of a nice smell, and out of bed tumbled 'the babies,' to dance round the stove and sniff at the soup, and drink milk like hungry kittens, till I could get bread and butter ready.

"It was great fun! and when we had cleared things up a bit, and I 'd put food for supper in the closet, and told Lotty to warm a bowl of soup for her mother and keep the fire going, I went home tired and dirty, but very glad I 'd found something to do. It is perfectly amazing how little poor people's things cost, and yet they can't get the small amount of money needed without working themselves to death. Why, all I bought did n't cost more than I often spend for flowers, or theatre tickets, or lunches, and it made those poor babies so comfortable I could have cried to think I 'd never done it before."

Ida paused to shake her head remorsefully, then went on with her story, sewing busily all the while on an unbleached cotton night-gown which looked about fit for a large doll.

"I have no romantic things to tell, for poor Mrs. Kennedy was a shiftless, broken-down woman, who could only 'sozzle round,' as Mrs. Grover said, and rub along with help from any one who would lend a hand. She had lived out, married young, and had no faculty about anything; so when her husband died, and she was left with three little children, it was hard to get on, with no trade, feeble health, and a discouraged mind. She does her best, loves the girls, and works hard at the only thing she can find to do; but when she gives out, they will all have to part, — she to a hospital, and the babies to some home. She dreads that, and tugs away, trying to keep together and get ahead. Thanks to Mrs. Grover, who is very sensible, and knows how to help poor people, we have made things comfortable, and the winter has gone nicely.

"The mother has got work nearer home, Lotty and Caddy go to school, and Tot is safe and warm, with Miss Parsons to look after her. Miss Parsons is a young woman who was freezing and starving in a little room upstairs, too proud to beg and too shy and sick to get much work. I found her warming her hands one day in Mrs. Kennedy's room, and hanging over the

soup-pot as if she was eating the smell. It reminded me of the picture in Punch where the two beggar boys look in at a kitchen, sniffing at the nice dinner cooking there. One says, 'I don't care for the meat, Bill, but I don't mind if I takes a smell at the pudd'n' when it's dished.' I proposed a lunch at once, and we all sat down, and ate soup out of yellow bowls with pewter spoons with such a relish it was fun to see. I had on my old rig; so poor Parsons thought I was some dressmaker or work-girl, and opened her heart to me as she never would have done if I 'd gone and demanded her confidence, and patronized her, as some people do when they want to help. I promised her some work, and proposed that she should do it in Mrs. K.'s room, as a favor, mind you, so that the older girls could go to school and Tot have some one to look after her. She agreed, and that saved her fire, and made the K.'s all right. Sarah (that's Miss P.) tried to stiffen up when she learned where I lived; but she wanted the work, and soon found I did n't put on airs, but lent her books, and brought her and Tot my bouquets and favors after a german, and told her pleąsant things as she sat cooking her poor chilblainy feet in the oven, as if she never could get thawed out.

"This summer the whole batch are to go to Uncle Frank's farm and pick berries, and get strong. He hires dozens of women and children during the fruit season, and Mrs. Grover said it was just what they all needed. So off they go in June, as merry as grigs, and I shall be able to look after them now and then, as I always go to the farm in July. That 's all, — not a bit interesting, but it came to me, and I did it, though only a small chore."

"I 'm sure the helping of five poor souls is a fine work, and you may well be proud of it, Ida. Now I know why you would n't go to matinées with me, and buy every pretty thing we saw as you used to. The pocket money went for coal and food, and your fancy-work was little clothes for these live dolls of yours. You dear thing! how good you were to cook, and grub, and prick your fingers rough, and give up fun, for this kind work!"

Maggie's hearty kiss, and the faces of her friends, made Ida feel that her humble task had its worth in their eyes, as well as in her own; and when the others had expressed their interest in her work, all composed themselves to hear what Marion had to tell.

"I have been taking care of a scarlet runner,

— a poor old frost-bitten, neglected thing; it is transplanted now, and doing well, I 'm happy to say."

"What *do* you mean?" asked Ella, while the rest looked very curious.

Marion picked up a dropped stitch in the large blue sock she was knitting, and continued, with a laugh in her eyes: "My dears, that is what we call the Soldiers' Messenger Corps, with their red caps and busy legs trotting all day. I 've had one of them to care for, and a gorgeous time of it, I do assure you. But before I exult over my success, I must honestly confess my failures, for they were sad ones. I was so anxious to begin my work at once, that I did go out and collar the first pauper I saw. It was an old man, who sometimes stands at the corners of streets to sell bunches of ugly paper flowers. You 've seen him, I dare say, and his magenta daisies and yellow peonies. Well, he was rather a forlorn object, with his poor old red nose, and bleary eyes, and white hair, standing at the windy corners silently holding out those horrid flowers. I bought all he had that day, and gave them to some colored children on my way home, and told him to come to our house and get an old coat Mamma was waiting

to get rid of. He told a pitiful story of himself and his old wife, who made the paper horrors in her bed, and how they needed everything, but did n't wish to beg. I was much touched, and flew home to look up the coat and some shoes, and when my old Lear came creeping in the back way, I ordered cook to give him a warm dinner and something nice for the old woman.

"I was called upstairs while he was mumbling his food, and blessing me in the most lovely manner; and he went away much comforted, I flattered myself. But an hour later, up came the cook in a great panic to report that my venerable and pious beggar had carried off several of Papa's shirts and pairs of socks out of the clothes-basket in the laundry, and the nice warm hood we keep for the girl to hang out clothes in.

"I was *very* angry, and, taking Harry with me, went at once to the address the old rascal gave me, a dirty court out of Hanover Street. No such person had ever lived there, and my white-haired saint was a humbug. Harry laughed at me, and Mamma forbade me to bring any more thieves to the house, and the girls scolded awfully.

"Well, I recovered from the shock, and, nothing daunted, went off to the little Irish-woman who sells apples on the Common, — not the fat, cosey one with the stall near West Street, but the dried-up one who sits by the path, nodding over an old basket with six apples and four sticks of candy in it. No one ever seems to buy anything, but she sits there and trusts to kind souls dropping a dime now and then, she looks so feeble and forlorn, 'on the cold, cold ground.'

"She told me another sad tale of being all alone and unable to work, and 'as wake as wather-grewl, without a hap-worth av flesh upon me bones, and for the love of Heaven gimme a thrifle to kape the breath av loife in a poor soul, with a bitter hard winter over me, and niver a chick or child to do a hand's turn.' I had n't much faith in her, remembering my other humbug, but I did pity the old mummy; so I got some tea and sugar, and a shawl, and used to give her my odd pennies as I passed. I never told at home, they made such fun of my efforts to be charitable. I thought I really was getting on pretty well after a time, as my old Biddy seemed quite cheered up, and I was planning to give her some coal, when she disappeared all of

a sudden. I feared she was ill, and asked Mrs. Maloney, the fat woman, about her.

"'Lord love ye, Miss dear, it 's tuk up and sint to the Island for tree months she is; for a drunken ould craythur is Biddy Ryan, and niver a cint but goes for whiskey, — more shame to her, wid a fine bye av her own ready to kape her daycint.'

"Then I *was* discouraged, and went home to fold my hands, and see what fate would send me, my own efforts being such failures."

"Poor thing, it *was* hard luck!" said Elizabeth, as they sobered down after the gale of merriment caused by Marion's mishaps, and her clever imitation of the brogue.

"Now tell of your success, and the scarlet runner," added Maggie.

"Ah! that was *sent*, and so I prospered. I must begin ever so far back, in war times, or I can't introduce my hero properly. You know Papa was in the army, and fought all through the war till Gettysburg, where he was wounded. He was engaged just before he went; so when his father hurried to him after that awful battle, Mamma went also, and helped nurse him till he could come home. He would n't go to an officer's hospital, but kept with his men in a poor

sort of place, for many of his boys were hit, and he would n't leave them. Sergeant Joe Collins was one of the bravest, and lost his right arm saving the flag in one of the hottest struggles of that great fight. He had been a Maine lumberman, and was over six feet tall, but as gentle as a child, and as jolly as a boy, and very fond of his colonel.

"Papa left first, but made Joe promise to let him know how he got on, and Joe did so till he too went home. Then Papa lost sight of him, and in the excitement of his own illness, and the end of the war, and being married, Joe Collins was forgotten, till we children came along, and used to love to hear the story of Papa's battles, and how the brave sergeant caught the flag when the bearer was shot, and held it in the rush till one arm was blown off and the other wounded. We have fighting blood in us, you know, so we were never tired of that story, though twenty-five years or more make it all as far away to us as the old Revolution, where *our* ancestor was killed, at *our* Bunker Hill!

"Last December, just after my sad disappointments, Papa came home to dinner one day, exclaiming, in great glee: 'I 've found old Joe! A messenger came with a letter to me, and

when I looked up to give my answer, there stood a tall, grizzled fellow, as straight as a ramrod, grinning from ear to ear, with his hand to his temple, saluting me in regular style. "Don't you remember Joe Collins, Colonel? Awful glad to see you, sir," said he. And then it all came back, and we had a good talk, and I found out that the poor old boy was down on his luck, and almost friendless, but as proud and independent as ever, and bound to take care of himself while he had a leg to stand on. I 've got his address, and mean to keep an eye on him, for he looks feeble and can't make much, I 'm sure.'

"We were all very glad, and Joe came to see us, and Papa sent him on endless errands, and helped him in that way till he went to New York. Then, in the fun and flurry of the holidays, we forgot all about Joe, till Papa came home and missed him from his post. I said I 'd go and find him; so Harry and I rummaged about till we did find him, in a little house at the North End, laid up with rheumatic fever in a stuffy back room, with no one to look after him but the washerwoman with whom he boarded.

"I was *so* sorry we had forgotten him! but *he*

"And there stood a tall grizzly man, saluting in regular style."
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never complained, only said, with his cheerful grin, 'I kinder mistrusted the Colonel was away, but I was n't goin' to pester him.' He tried to be jolly, though in dreadful pain; called Harry 'Major,' and was so grateful for all we brought him, though he did n't want oranges and tea, and made us shout when I said, like a goose, thinking that was the proper thing to do, 'Shall I bathe your brow, you are so feverish?'

"'No, thanky, miss, it was swabbed pretty stiddy to the horsepittle, and I reckon a trifle of tobaccer would do more good and be a sight more relishin', ef you 'll excuse my mentionin' it.'

"Harry rushed off and got a great lump and a pipe, and Joe lay blissfully puffing, in a cloud of smoke, when we left him, promising to come again. We did go nearly every day, and had lovely times; for Joe told us his adventures, and we got so interested in the war that I began to read up evenings, and Papa was pleased, and fought all his battles over again for us, and Harry and I were great friends reading together, and Papa was charmed to see the old General's spirit in us, as we got excited and discussed all our wars in a fever of patriotism that made Mamma laugh. Joe said I 'brustled up' at the

word *battle* like a war-horse at the smell of powder, and I 'd ought to have been a drummer, the sound of martial music made me so 'skittish.'

"It was all new and charming to us young ones, but poor old Joe had a hard time, and was very ill. Exposure and fatigue, and scanty food, and loneliness, and his wounds, were too much for him, and it was plain his working days were over. He hated the thought of the poor-house at home, which was all his own town could offer him, and he had no friends to live with, and he could not get a pension, something being wrong about his papers; so he would have been badly off, but for the Soldiers' Home at Chelsea. As soon as he was able, Papa got him in there, and he was glad to go, for that seemed the proper place, and a charity the proudest man might accept, after risking his life for his country.

"There is where I used to be going when you saw me, and I was *so* afraid you 'd smell the cigars in my basket. The dear old boys always want them, and Papa says they *must* have them, though it is n't half so romantic as flowers, and jelly, and wine, and the dainty messes we women always want to carry. I 've learned

about different kinds of tobacco and cigars, and you 'd laugh to see me deal out my gifts, which are received as gratefully as the Victoria Cross, when the Queen decorates *her* brave men. I 'm quite a great gun over there, and the boys salute when I come, tell me their woes, and think that Papa and I can run the whole concern. I like it immensely, and am as proud and fond of my dear old wrecks as if I 'd been a Rigoletto, and ridden on a cannon from my babyhood. That 's *my* story, but I can't begin to tell how interesting it all is, nor how glad I am that it led me to look into the history of American wars, in which brave men of our name did their parts so well."

A hearty round of applause greeted Marion's tale, for her glowing face and excited voice stirred the patriotic spirit of the Boston girls, and made them beam approvingly upon her.

"Now, Maggie, dear, last but not least, I 'm sure," said Anna, with an encouraging glance, for *she* had discovered the secret of this friend, and loved her more than ever for it.

Maggie blushed and hesitated, as she put down the delicate muslin cap-strings she was hemming with such care. Then, looking about her with a face in which both humility and

pride contended, she said, with an effort, "After the other lively experiences, mine will sound very flat. In fact, I have no story to tell, for *my* charity began at home, and stopped there."

"Tell it, dear. I know it is interesting, and will do us all good," said Anna, quickly; and, thus supported, Maggie went on.

"I planned great things, and talked about what I meant to do, till Papa said one day, when things were in a mess, as they often are, at our house, 'If the little girls who want to help the world along would remember that charity begins at home, they would soon find enough to do.'

"I was rather taken aback, and said no more, but after Papa had gone to the office, I began to think, and looked round to see what there was to be done at that particular moment. I found enough for that day, and took hold at once; for poor Mamma had one of her bad headaches, the children could not go out because it rained, and so were howling in the nursery, cook was on a rampage, and Maria had the toothache. Well, I began by making Mamma lie down for a good long sleep. I kept the children quiet by giving them my ribbon box and jewelry to dress up with, put a poultice

on Maria's face, and offered to wash the glass and silver for her, to appease cook, who was as cross as two sticks over extra work washing-day. It was n't much fun, as you may imagine, but I got through the afternoon, and kept the house still, and at dusk crept into Mamma's room and softly built up the fire, so it should be cheery when she waked. Then I went trembling to the kitchen for some tea, and there found three girls calling, and high jinks going on; for one whisked a plate of cake into the table drawer, another put a cup under her shawl, and cook hid the teapot, as I stirred round in the china closet before opening the slide, through a crack of which I 'd seen, heard, and smelt 'the party,' as the children call it.

"I was angry enough to scold the whole set, but I wisely held my tongue, shut my eyes, and politely asked for some hot water, nodded to the guests, and told cook Maria was better, and would do her work if she wanted to go out.

"So peace reigned, and as I settled the tray, I heard cook say in her balmiest tone, for I suspect the cake and tea lay heavy on her conscience, 'The mistress is very poorly, and Miss takes nice care of her, the dear.'

"All blarney, but it pleased me and made me

remember how feeble poor Mamma was, and how little I really did. So I wept a repentant weep as I toiled upstairs with my tea and toast, and found Mamma all ready for them, and so pleased to find things going well. I saw by that what a relief it would be to her if I did it oftener, as I ought, and as I resolved that I would.

"I didn't say anything, but I kept on doing whatever came along, and before I knew it ever so many duties slipped out of Mamma's hands into mine, and seemed to belong to me. I don't mean that I liked them, and didn't grumble to myself; I did, and felt regularly crushed and injured sometimes when I wanted to go and have my own fun. Duty is right, but it isn't easy, and the only comfort about it is a sort of quiet feeling you get after a while, and a strong feeling, as if you 'd found something to hold on to and keep you steady. I can't express it, but you know?" And Maggie looked wistfully at the other faces, some of which answered her with a quick flash of sympathy, and some only wore a puzzled yet respectful expression, as if they felt they ought to know, but did not.

"I need not tire you with all my humdrum doings," continued Maggie. "I made no plans,

but just said each day, 'I 'll take what comes, and try to be cheerful and contented.' So I looked after the children, and that left Maria more time to sew and help round. I did errands, and went to market, and saw that Papa had his meals comfortably when Mamma was not able to come down. I made calls for her, and received visitors, and soon went on as if I were the lady of the house, not 'a chit of a girl,' as Cousin Tom used to call me.

"The best of all were the cosey talks we had in the twilight, Mamma and I, when she was rested, and all the day's worry was over, and we were waiting for Papa. Now, when he came, I did n't have to go away, for they wanted to ask and tell me things, and consult about affairs, and make me feel that I was really the eldest daughter. Oh, it was just lovely to sit between them and know that they needed me, and loved to have me with them! That made up for the hard and disagreeable things, and not long ago I got my reward. Mamma is better, and I was rejoicing over it, when she said, 'Yes, I really am mending now, and hope soon to be able to relieve my good girl. But I want to tell you, dear, that when I was most discouraged my greatest comfort was, that if I

had to leave my poor babies they would find such a faithful little mother in you.'

"I was *so* pleased I wanted to cry, for the children *do* love me, and run to me for everything now, and think the world of Sister, and they did n't use to care much for me. But that was n't all. I ought not to tell these things, perhaps, but I 'm so proud of them I can't help it. When I asked Papa privately, if Mamma was *really* better and in no danger of falling ill again, he said, with his arms round me, and such a tender kiss, —

"'No danger now, for this brave little girl put her shoulder to the wheel so splendidly, that the dear woman got the relief from care she needed just at the right time, and now she really rests sure that we are not neglected. You could n't have devoted yourself to a better charity, or done it more sweetly, my darling. God bless you!'"

Here Maggie's voice gave out, and she hid her face, with a happy sob, that finished her story eloquently. Marion flew to wipe her tears away with the blue sock, and the others gave a sympathetic murmur, looking much touched; forgotten duties of their own rose before them, and sudden resolutions were made to attend to

them at once, seeing how great Maggie's reward had been.

"I did n't mean to be silly; but I wanted you to know that I had n't been idle all winter, and that, though I have n't much to tell, I 'm *quite* satisfied with my chore," she said, looking up with smiles shining through the tears till her face resembled a rose in a sun-shower.

"Many daughters have done well, but thou excellest them all," answered Anna, with a kiss that completed her satisfaction.

"Now, as it is after our usual time, and we must break up," continued the President, producing a basket of flowers from its hiding-place, "I will merely say that I think we have all learned a good deal, and will be able to work better next winter; for I am sure we shall want to try again, it adds so much sweetness to our own lives to put even a little comfort into the hard lives of the poor. As a farewell token, I sent for some real Plymouth mayflowers, and here they are, a posy apiece, with my love and many thanks for your help in carrying out my plan so beautifully."

So the nosegays were bestowed, the last lively chat enjoyed, new plans suggested, and good-byes said; then the club separated, each mem-

ber going gayly away with the rosy flowers on her bosom, and in it a clearer knowledge of the sad side of life, a fresh desire to see and help still more, and a sweet satisfaction in the thought that each had done what she could.

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